

Refuge campfires—if you choose to light one, be ready to put it out

by Doug Newbould

Campfires, especially those that are left unattended or abandoned, continue to plague Peninsula firefighters in 2002. In fact, campfires are still the number one cause of wildfires on the Peninsula and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

In the week leading up to and including Memorial Day, firefighters from the Alaska Division of Forestry and the Refuge extinguished more than 30 unattended or abandoned campfires on the western half of the Peninsula. This number does not include campfires that local fire departments, the Chugach National Forest or conscientious citizens put out.

Considering the unreported fires, it would be reasonable to assume that more than 50 abandoned campfires were discovered and extinguished during the extended holiday weekend. And frankly, I am just flabbergasted by this statistic. How can this be?

Over the past five years or so, the local firefighting community has spent a lot of time, money and effort on wildland fire prevention. There have been numerous fire prevention news articles, radio spots and talk shows, pamphlets, fliers and posters. We have done “campfire talks” in the campgrounds, environmental education with school groups and individually contacted thousands of campers over the years with the outdoor fire safety message. So why, after 50 years of Smokey saying, “Only you can prevent forest fires!” do we still face this problem? Has the message been overused to the point that it has lost its meaning? Do some people hit the disconnect switch whenever they hear the words “fire prevention?” I just don’t know.

If we assume that most people who camp or start campfires on the Peninsula are aware of the fire danger and that they know how to start, maintain and extinguish a campfire safely, then the problem must be with attitude. We can speculate and make inferences about the attitudes of carelessness, laziness, malice and ignorance as reasons why people abandon campfires.

So how can we change the attitudes of those who walk away from a burning campfire, without at least attempting to put it out? Obviously, those of us in fire prevention are struggling with this question.

Besides attitude, another issue is location. In general, wildfires caused by abandoned campfires occur in primitive campsites, in the backcountry or outside of developed campgrounds. Is this because the type of people who prefer a more primitive or private camping experience are more careless? Is it because people in developed campgrounds do a better job of keeping an eye on each other? Or is it because primitive campsites don’t generally have steel or concrete fire rings?

From the people I’ve met in the backcountry, I don’t believe primitive campers are more careless. Developed campgrounds do benefit from intensive management and tend to be self-policing. So perhaps the third reason, the lack of fire rings, has some validity.

I should emphasize that most unattended or abandoned campfires that escape to become wildfires either smolder and creep through the duff, or throw burning embers into surrounding forest fuels.

Perhaps there are still people out there who lack knowledge about how to prepare a safe campfire site before igniting the fire, or about how to be sure a campfire is dead out.

Tom Marok, the logistics coordinator at State Forestry in Soldotna likes to say this about campfires: “Prepare before you begin.”

This is good advice for every camper. Before you light your campfire or camp stove or charcoal grill, ask yourself these questions:

Is there a mineral soil fire line around my fire? (With no burnable vegetation, fuel or organic soils that the fire can reach?).

Do I have an adequate supply of water and a tool available to put the fire out or stop it, if it escapes confinement?

Is it too windy or dry for me to safely light a fire?

Sharon Roesch is the fire prevention officer at Soldotna Forestry (260-4200). She has a lot of good fire prevention information and she is always thinking about new ways to get the word out.

When I asked her what she wanted to say about campfire safety, she said, “Location, Location, Location. Pick a good spot for your campfire, because peat

burns deep!”

Sharon and Tom and I all agree, a peat or duff fire is the most likely fire to escape detection and it can be the most difficult to put out. So choose the location for your campfire wisely. Avoid deep duff, peat moss and organic soils.

And finally, make sure you put the fire out “cold” or “dead out” as some of us say. Drown the fire with water, and use your camp shovel to mix the coals with dirt. Before you leave camp, carefully feel all materials with your bare hands, making sure that no roots or duff are burning at the edges of the fire.

I doubt that people who take the time to read the

Refuge Notebook articles are the kind of people who would abandon a campfire.

On the contrary, I believe they are the people who help take care of our campgrounds, trails and wild places. Let’s all continue to be vigilant, when it comes to campfire safety and wildfire prevention on the Peninsula.

We’ve got a lot to lose!

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.